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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MILAN 000209

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LEGA'S BIG NIGHT OUT: FILM PREMIERE OF ""BARBAROSSA""

Classified By: Consul General Carol Z. Perez for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Hundreds of local and national politicians, including PM Berlusconi, attended the Milan premiere of the colossal Braveheart-like epic film ""Barbarossa."" The movie tells the story of the birth of northern Italy,s Lombard League and its defeat of the Holy Roman army at the 12th century Battle of Legnano. Throughout its production, Northern League (LN) leader Umberto Bossi and fellow LN colleagues have supported and eagerly anticipated the film, which describes in loving, big-blockbuster detail the quasi-historical origins of their modern political movement. Regardless of the quality of the film, ""Barbarossa"" brings to life the populist and traditional imagery that underscores much of the LN,s increasing popular appeal among northern Italian voters. END SUMMARY.

MEDIEVAL NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

¶2. (U) On October 2, thousands of eager spectators were treated to a screening of the medieval war epic ""Barbarossa."" The premiere was held in the picturesque courtyard of Milan,s Castello Sforzesco, illuminated by candles and torches and populated by dozens of actors dressed as medieval knights and swordsmen. Unlike a regular movie premiere, however, the red carpet featured virtually no actors nor actresses; the guest list was instead a veritable who,s who of center-right politicians. A beaming Northern League (LN) leader Umberto Bossi sat in the front row next to Prime Minister Berlusconi and numerous Cabinet ministers (Minister of Economy Giulio Tremonti, Minister of Legislative Simplification Roberto Calderoli, Minister of Agriculture Luca Zaia, Minister of Defense La Russa, among others) along with Mayor of Milan Letizia Moratti, Lombardy Regional President Roberto Formigoni, and hundreds of LN politicians and supporters, bedecked in the party,s traditional bright green scarves and ties.

""BARBAROSSA"": PLOT AND CONTEXT

¶3. (U) ""Barbarossa"" recounts the destruction of Milan in 1162 by the army of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I in his quest to dominate northern Italy, and the subsequent birth of the Lombard League, an alliance of northern Italian cities united by Milanese blacksmith Alberto da Giussano that successfully repulsed the much larger imperial army at the Battle of Legnano. The battle itself serves as the mythical birthplace of the modern LN party, which (accurately or not) traces its roots back to the Lombard League and claims as its mandate those of the original League: northern Italian autonomy and defense from external threats (though Roman bureaucrats have replaced the soldiers of the Holy Roman Empire). The movie, which even features Bossi as an extra, is rich with symbolism beloved by modern LN supporters; it features a lengthy montage in which hero da Guissano forges hundreds of steel rings emblazoned with the shield that serves as the modern LN,s emblem, and distributes them to eager Lombard League recruits.

14. (U) The movie, directed by Bossi,s friend and LN supporter Renzo Martinelli, has had the firm backing of the LN throughout its production. The official LN website featured links to ""Barbarossa"" and other information about the movie prior to its release, and LN newspaper ""La Padania"" even devoted five pages to coverage of the movie on the day of its Milan premiere, under the lead title, ""The story of our people who recaptured their liberty."" Speaking to journalists at the premiere, Bossi showered praise on the ""modern Alberto da Giussanos"" whose continued fight for freedom is a ""sign that the desire for liberty will never die.""

15. (C) COMMENT: ""Barbarossa"", much like the political party that supported the film,s creation, is short on subtlety and heavily reliant on mythology and folklorist symbolism. This flair for dramatic imagery has helped the Northern League stand out among the ever-evolving, and rhetorically boring, array of political parties in Italy. Furthermore, as evidenced by the crush of political VIPs at the opening of an otherwise forgettable war movie, the LN leadership has managed to create a relevant and important party, at the national as well as regional level, because beneath its crude rhetoric and silly rituals, it understands and taps into the deep-seated and very real concerns of voters in northern Italy. Many in the affluent north, the traditional economic and industrial backbone of the country, feel that the central government in Rome takes their money and uses it to feed its enormous, inefficient bureaucracy and to subsidize the chronically underperforming South. Furthermore, the influx of immigrants to the region makes many northern Italians feel that their geographical and cultural spaces are under attack from outsiders. Therefore, for LN supporters ""Barbarossa's"" box office success is beside the point. Its existence alone, with its big-screen glorification of the Lombard League and

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its noble fight for liberty from outside rule, underscores the party,s most populist and viscerally resonant themes.

PEREZ

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